Lab Language

Dear Labby,

I’m an assistant professor going into my third year at a U.S. university. I recently received the comments from our promotion and tenure committee. The overall review of my package showed that I was on track for tenure and promotion, except in one area. The committee noted negative comments in my reviews from English-speaking students. The students complained because day-to-day lab interactions are conducted in my native language, which is not English. Since the majority of my graduate students and postdocs are from my homeland, it is easier for me to talk with them in our native language. What should I do?

—Polyglot PI

Dear Polyglot PI,

While Labby certainly appreciates how natural it is for you and the lab members from your homeland to use your native tongue in conversations around the lab, your promotion and tenure committee has raised an important concern. The good news is that they let you know they are worried about this early in your pre-tenure career, and you have time to address their concern.

There are a number of reasons for the committee to highlight this as an issue. Most importantly, the concern was initially raised by students, and their comments suggest that they may have felt excluded or isolated when working under your supervision. Your lab is not just an engine for research, it’s also an educational environment for your students, and your department wants its labs to be welcoming and inclusive environments for all the trainees who work and learn there. If you conduct routine conversations in your native language, you are excluding students who are not from your homeland from exchanges that could benefit them and might provide them with insights and knowledge that will ultimately benefit you by helping them to make progress on their projects. You are also likely to miss out on the ideas and perspectives that they could bring to your science from their different backgrounds and experiences. An inclusive and diverse team will enhance the creativity of your research group.

Moreover, making English the lingua franca for your lab will enhance the educational experience for the trainees and postdocs from your homeland as well. Increasing their fluency and comfort in English can only improve their career prospects, expand their scientific network, help them to give better talks, and make writing papers and grants easier for them—making less work for you in editing and revising! Practicing these skills in the friendly environment of the lab will help them whether they choose to stay in the United States or return to your homeland. You’ll also help them to fully participate in your department, whether it be in social activities, meetings with seminar speakers, or just chatting in the hallways. Labby is also aware of a number of incidents in which language barriers led, unfortunately, to misunderstanding that contributed to serious safety issues, so it’s best to have the day-to-day business of the lab conducted in English.

Finally, Labby has encountered examples where a lab became isolated from the rest of the department and the PI had difficulty in recruiting some of the best students because of a perception that only students from a certain country were welcome. Of course you should feel free to conduct private conversations in your office in your native language, and there will be circumstances when it is better to do so. But you will help yourself and the students and postdocs in your group if you make English the language of the day-to-day business of the lab. Labby hopes you will embrace the advice offered by your colleagues and make your lab an example of the benefits of a cross-cultural scientific environment.

—Labby

Got Questions?

Labby has answers. ASCB’s popular columnist will select career-related questions for publication and thoughtful response in the ASCB Newsletter. Confidentiality guaranteed if requested. Write us at labby@ascb.org.